

# Hair Cordage in Oceania

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Long, relatively straight hair, one of the characteristic physical features of the Polynesians, has given rise to a small but significant element in their material culture. Human hair, braided into remarkably fine and even cordage, is used throughout Polynesia and in parts of Micronesia. Its use in Melanesia is restricted to such Polynesian outliers as Sikiana, Tikopia and Rennell, and the Southern New Hebrides, where Polynesian affinities are recognizable.

It should be noted that while hair is used in ornaments throughout Oceania, this paper refers only to its use in cordage, which implies plaiting or rolling.

The technique of making hair cordage is characterised by a considerable degree of uniformity throughout its geographical range in Oceania. It is generally a simple three-ply plait, made up with great neatness and regularity.

The articles made from this cordage fall into a few well-defined types. They are (1) personal ornaments; (2) cordage for decorative lashing; (3) fishing lines.

While the articles made from cordage in most islands are thus clearly defined, small local variations in detail are recognizable.

## 1.—PERSONAL ORNAMENTS.

### GIRDLES.

Girdles made of many strands of thin hair cord occur in several groups. They were usually worn by men and apparently indicated the rank and wealth of the wearer.

**Niue.** The wonderfully fine, many-stranded girdles from Niue are common in museums. One in the Auckland Museum Collection (A.M. 24949) is made of the typical three-ply flat braid 1 mm. wide (Pl. 15, fig. 2), looped into a continuous skein a yard long, comprising almost 200 strands. The strands of the skein are secured by a twist in the centre, and the ends are seized with hair cord to form neat loops for fastening (Pl. 15, fig. 1).

**Society Islands.** Girdles of finely plaited hair were amongst the ornaments used in this group. Detailed information is not available, but Handy (1927 p. 108) quotes Wilson, who mentions girdles, "the braids of which were six or nine hairs in thickness," which would lead us to suppose that they were similar in form to those from Niue.

**Easter Island.** In describing the dress of the islanders, Metraux (1940, p. 216) mentions "the string of women's hair, the thickness of the

little finger," from which hung a form of grass kilt. It should be noted that this girdle is apparently worn as a single cord, and thus differs from those above, which consist of a skein of hair cords.

**Micronesia—Gilbert Is.** Handsome, many-stranded girdles, dark and glossy, are still worn by men in the Gilbert Islands as an ornamental fastening to secure the dancing mat at the hips.

Wilkes (1852, 2, p, 219) noted the use of these ornaments. "Long strings of beads or braided hair," he wrote, "are worn round the body, at times a hundred fathoms in length, which serve to fasten the mat."

In this group again the three-ply plait is most commonly used, but it is much coarser than in the Polynesian examples, being as much as 3 mm. wide. Three-ply cord used in these belts is also distinguished by a fringe formed of free ends of hair (Pl. 16, fig. 3). These girdles contain 9 to 12 strands of cord, knotted at the ends.

Another type of girdle (A.M. 25222, Maude Coll.), from Nonouti, in the Gilbert Is., is of four-ply cord in a round plait 2 mm. thick, in this type of cord without a fringe (Pl. 16, fig. 4). The cord is made up into a skein of about 20 strands, two yards long, bound at the ends with round cord.

## NECKLACES.

**Polynesia.** Necklaces in this area were made from hair cord, and differ from group to group only in minute details. The general form of this ornament is a thick, short skein of continuous cord, seized at the ends with hair or fibre and finished with eyelet holes or with cords for fastening. Hair necklets were worn either as suspension cords for shell or whale-ivory pendants, or without any additional ornament.

Their use is recorded from Cook Islands, Tongareva, Mangareva, Austral Is., Society Is., Marquesas Is., Hawaii and Easter Id.

**Micronesia—Gilbert Is.** Similar necklaces are still worn as dance ornaments in the Gilbert Islands. A specimen from Tabituea (A.M. 24110, Maude Coll.) in the Auckland Museum is a skein 32 cm. long consisting of 160 strands of fine three-ply braid 1 mm. wide, with plaited cords of hair for tying at the back of the neck (Pl. 15, fig. 4).

**Ellice Is.** A necklace of the same type from this group, in the American Museum of Natural History, is described by Linton (1923, p. 427) as being similar to those from the Marquesas.

**Polynesian Outliers—Sikiana.** A specimen of modern make from Sikiana is a smooth hair braid, 1.5 mm. wide, looped into three lengths and decorated with pearl buttons.

**Southern New Hebrides.** The Museum Godeffroy in Hamburg (Schmeltz and Krause, 1881) catalogues two specimens of human hair cordage from Aneityum. One, probably a necklace, is made up of cord 1 mm. wide, and the other is .5 mm. wide.

## Variations in Cordage Technique.

**Hawaii.** There are several variations from the usual three-ply braid used for these necklaces in most groups. In the handsome

Hawaiian neck ornament with its pendant ivory hook the heavy skein is made of 8-ply *square* braid 1 mm. wide. It is interesting to note here that in this specimen (A.M. 14537) approximately 350 yards of continuous cord have been used (Pl. 15, fig. 3).

**Mangareva.** Buck (1938) describes the *two-ply twisted* cord used here, three of these two-ply cords being twisted together into a rope from which a pearl shell is suspended.

### HEAD ORNAMENTS.

**Society Is.** Cords of finely braided human hair were bound round and round the head to form a turban. Handy (1927, p. 108) states that nothing of the method of preparing or of braiding the hair had been preserved in the memory of the Tahitians. He quotes Banks, who wrote that he had seen these braids "plaited scarcely thicker than a common pack-thread, in pieces above a mile in length, worked on end without a single knot," and Ellis, who saw such a head-dress containing 100 fathoms of braid.

**New Zealand.** Into this category falls a particularly interesting specimen in the Auckland Museum (A.M. 5329) (Pl. 15, fig. 2). This is a thick tuft of hair found at Waimamaku, almost certainly in a burial cave. The tuft, which must have been cut off close to the scalp, is bound together with a skein of extremely fine and delicate hair cord .7 mm. wide (Pl. 16, fig. 1). The flat three-ply braid consists of approximately 14 hairs. The plaits are bound together at one point with a flat binding of hair cord.

This specimen gains significance in the light of a reference by Elsdon Best (1924, p. 208), who writes, "a man would sometimes use a finely plaited cord formed from the hair of a slain enemy wherewith to confine his own top-knot of hair. It was termed a *kota*." This name seems to have been applied to hair cord in general. Williams (1921) defines it as "a rope of human hair used in certain rites."

Crozet (1891, p. 44, Ling Roth translation), who saw hair being braided into cord in the Bay of Islands in 1772, mentioned briefly "yarn of 5 or 6 strands of hair, which is very strong." He unfortunately gives us no details of its manufacture or its use; but that it might have occurred widely in New Zealand, is suggested by Skinner's (1923, p. 93) record of the discovery of a piece of hair cord in a cave as far south as Otago.

**Niue.** A head ornament from Niue (A.M. 16858.4) is made from a cord of banana bark, surmounted by a band of yellow feathers, with a plume of white tropic bird feathers rising from the centre. The bases of the feathers are covered with a decorative binding of three-ply plaited hair cord interwoven with strips of white pandanus leaf to form a pattern.

### OTHER USES.

**Cook Islands.** Here Buck (1944, p. 117) quotes Gill as stating that the quantity of fine hair cord worn in necklaces and other ornaments indicated the rank of the wearer. In Mangaia plaited human hair was wrapped round and round the arms and ankles.

**Tahiti.** An ear ornament of finely plaited hair, with a button at one end and a sinnet seized loop at the other, is figured in the catalogue of the Oldman Collection (1943).

**Hawaii.** Slings used in warfare were made from coconut fibre and from pandanus leaf, and also from braided human hair.

## 2.—DECORATIVE CORDAGE.

Composite cord of sinnet and human hair occurs to some extent in both Polynesia and Micronesia.

**Polynesia—Cook Is.** Here fine sinnet braid was wrapped with human hair to form a smooth cord. This was used for decorative pendants and lashings on carved wooden gods. Hair-wrapped sinnet is also used in a cord figured by Buck (1944, p, 113), from Mangaia, where it was worn as a dress ornament by chiefs.

**Tahiti.** Edge Partington (1895, 2, p, 18) figures a length of twisted coconut fibre cord wrapped with human hair.

I have been unable to localize a long piece of cord in the Auckland Museum (A.M. 18092), although it is undoubtedly Polynesian. The four-ply hair plaiting tightly covers a core consisting of a single strand of strong fibre. The whole cord, which is round in section, is 1 mm. thick.

**Micronesia—Gilbert Is.** Handsome black and brown twine in which one ply of hair and one of coconut are twisted together is distinctive of many Gilbert Island handcrafts. It is used with decorative effect in the highly developed lashing patterns of this region, for binding sharks' teeth to the edges of wooden swords, and in the making of personal ornaments. Similar cord is recorded from the Ellice Islands.

## 3.—FISHING LINES.

**Polynesia.** Compared with decorative and ornamental hair cordage, that used in fishing lines would probably have been regarded as of little value, and specimens have thus not been preserved. It is possibly for this reason that there is little evidence of the use of hair cordage for fishing lines in ancient Polynesia.

The only available record of its use for this purpose is from ancient Tahiti. The Spaniard Joseph Amich wrote in his journal (trans. Corney, 1915, p. 81), "their fine lines are made of human hair deftly plaited, and the coarser ones of the fibre of the coconut palm."

**Micronesia.** In the Gilbert Islands fishing lines were frequently made of human hair. Such lines consist of a round 4-ply plait approximately 3 mm. thick. The fine cord used for lashing the point to the shank of the composite hook is also made from hair, and the snood is also whipped with it.

**Polynesian Outliers.** Fine hair lines of 3-ply plait in the Auckland Museum collections have come from Rennell Is. and from Sikiana. Both are approximately 3 mm. wide, and that from Rennell Is. is 92 feet long.

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- Fig. 1. Girdle of hair cord from Niue.
- Fig. 2. Tuft of hair bound together with fine hair cord, Waimamaku, New Zealand.
- Fig. 3. Neck ornament, Hawaii.
- Fig. 4. Necklace of hair cord, Gilbert Islands.

## CONCLUSION.

This cordage depends upon the physical fact of long hair, and so has remained a stable element in Polynesian culture; the raw material has always been available, even in the changed environment of new islands. In addition to this purely physical fact, the distribution of hair cordage throughout the Gilbert Islands, Polynesia and the Polynesian outliers, would suggest that its use was a feature of the early culture shared by the Polynesians before their dispersal from a common home. Hair cordage made up into ornaments of related type occurred in the Society Islands, Hawaii, New Zealand and other groups. Its use must have been established before the emigration of settlers from Central Polynesia to the surrounding islands.

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EXAMPLES OF HAIR CORDAGE.

- Fig. 1. Three-ply hair cord, Waimamaku, New Zealand.
- Fig. 2. Three-ply hair cord from girdle, Niue.
- Fig. 3. Fringed three-ply hair cord from girdle, Gilbert Islands.
- Fig. 4. Round four-ply cord from girdle, Gilbert Islands.